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ABSTRACT

Because students who do not read and write cannot participate effectively in a democratic society, the staff of the College Skills Program at Burlington County (New Jersey) College has designed a developmental skills program in reading and writing with a social science core. The program (Social Science 100) emphasizes reading, thinking, questioning, writing, and student attitudes. A simple formula, "five questions and a stack of books," is used as the framework for the course. Emphasis is on support systems and thought-provoking questions that best reflect five critical issues of the century: (1) spreading the American way over the rest of the world; (2) dealing with severe economic problems via socialist revolution, conservative rectification, or liberal reform; (3) policies toward fascism and communism; (4) the "liberation" of the sixties; and (5) the decline or rebirth of the late twentieth century in America. Instead of textbooks, the program uses a variety of books about persons whose lives were intimately bound up with the issues of the times, thereby showing how Americans interrelated with the rest of the world. In addition, essay tests are used and teacher flexibility is encouraged. Students in this program show marked improvement in two areas: heightened political understanding and diminished ethnocentrism. (LH)

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FIVE QUESTIONS AND A STACK OF BOOKS:

REMEDIATION FOR A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY.

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FIVE QUESTIONS AND A STACK OF BOOKS: REMEDIATION FOR A DEMOCRATIC SOCIETY

When in April 1983 the National Commission on Excellence in Education warned that a "rising tide of mediocrity . . . threatens our very future as a nation and people," the College Skills Program at Burlington County College was already in its fourth year of a curriculum designed explicitly to reverse that tide. Like the national commission, from the beginning we had seen the problem in a political context. Students who can't and don't read and write cannot participate effectively in a democratic society; a nation thus undermined from within can no longer function effectively in the global community. Therefore we designed a developmental skills program in reading and writing with a special kind of social science course as the core--a course specifically directed toward educating students for participation in a democratic society and a global village. This course is Social Science 100: "America in the World."

In content, the course is about the twentieth century. But it does not stress facts, names, or dates; these are learned, but only indirectly. The focus is on reading, thinking, questioning, and writing. The students are helped to find themselves in this century. A message is conveyed: *"You must learn what has happened in your century. You must become familiar with it, decade by decade: not the dates of battles or the names of Presidents, but the issues over which people have been struggling. You must learn it with a scope that is worldwide, and with a mind that is open. This century must become a part of you, must become like second nature. Open books, and begin to read. Piece things together. Add it up. You are the future."*

The central mission of Social Science 100 is to transform student attitude, to stimulate inquiry. "The university," Mario Savio wrote from Berkeley in 1964, "is the place where people begin seriously to question the conditions of their existence and raise the issue of whether they can be committed to the society they have been born into." Free inquiry, putting the fixed ideas of childhood before the scrutiny of scientific examination, is the soul of the university community. And for millions of students the community college is the locus of that university community for their first two years. The underlying commitment of higher education to inquiry gives it a very different bent from most high schools. The change is difficult to grasp, especially for the student who is not used to reading and writing, activities that are like breathing in and breathing out in the college milieu. Sometimes the community college gives up on affecting the change, transforming the two-year-college experience into something like the continuation of high school.

The way Social Science 100 is taught dramatizes the break from high school. The College Skills Program's way of handling this has evolved over the last four years to the simplest of formulas: "five questions and a stack of books." To be more accurate we might add: "five questions, a stack of books, and a lot of support." The support systems--the fact that the reading teacher in a parallel course is directly aiding with the reading and notetaking skills required by the social science course; that the writing teacher is simultaneously developing the necessary writing skills; that the social science instructor provides thought-provoking films, "hands-on" foreign guests (Chinese, Russians, and so on), and plentiful discussion sessions; and that a counselor is meeting with students as a class every week to deal with problems as they come up--have from the first day been crucial to the success of the Burlington County College Skills Program. Yet having the simple centerpiece of "five questions and a stack of books" gives a truly collegiate, adult focus to it all.

The five questions we use are:

1. Spreading the American Way over the Rest of the World:
ARE WE IMPERIALISTS OR BENEFACTORS?
(Focus: 1898-1920)

2. How to Deal with Severe Economic Problems:
SOCIALIST REVOLUTION, CONSERVATIVE RECTIFICATION, OR LIBERAL REFORM?
(Focus: 1910-40)

3. Accommodation or Confrontation:
WHAT POLICIES TOWARD FASCISM AND COMMUNISM?
(Focus: 1935-60)

4. "Liberation"
WHAT WERE THE SIXTIES SEEKING?
(Focus: 1960-73)

5. The Late Twentieth Century:
AMERICAN DECLINE OR AMERICAN REBIRTH?
(Focus: 1970-90)

The questions were chosen because they seemed to be the five crucial issues of the century that have had worldwide as well as domestic importance. Lasting questions, they have been debated for many decades and never really subsided.

The idea of the "stack of books," is to open up new horizons beyond the high school formula of a course always centering on one all-seeing, totally objective, textbooky textbook. Collegiate learning needs to be presented as a search in different books--books for one's permanent library rather than "students only" books. Of course there are limitations on purchase price. Also, if this is to be an introduction to the twentieth century, it would be good to have one book that deals with the overall chronological sweep as a central resource. Taking those factors into consideration, in Social Science 100 we have used:

A People's History of the United States, by Howard Zinn
(provocative, told as a story, strong on the twentieth century, and only $7.95)

and three of these, all of which are reasonably inexpensive:

John Reed: Witness to Revolution, by Tamara Hovey (1910-20)
American Hunger, by Richard Wright (1930s)
Eleanor and Franklin (Pt. 4), by Joseph Lash (1930s and 1940s)
Till Morning Comes, by Han Suyin (1940s and 1950s)
American Caesar, by William Manchester (1940s and 1950s)
"Beyond Vietnam" (April 4, 1967 speech), by Martin Luther King, Jr.
Missing, by Thomas Hauser (1970s)

These books were chosen because they all concern persons whose lives were intimately bound up with the issues of their time. Furthermore, most of them are about Americans whose lives reached out to other countries, thereby showing how the United States interrelated with the rest of the world. Abstract concepts and distant countries are more accessible to the less-advanced student when introduced within the context of an American person's relationship with them. The longer books (Suyin and Manchester) are used with a study guide developed by the instructor.

In testing, everything is geared toward the essay. (In our experience, when half the test is multiple-choice and half is essay, students tend to concentrate on the multiple-choice and hope the essay will not count much.) Flexibility is important for students who need more time to work on their writing skills. For example, some students are offered a combination written and oral exam during the early and even the middle weeks of the semester. Sometimes a different kind of test (like one paragraph identifications) is substituted for a student who cannot seem to synthesize material, yet has probably learned something. This student may take two semesters to pass.

Results? Students who have gone through the College Skills Program at Burlington County College actually have better GPAs than students who tested out of the program. Writing done by students who have completed Social Science 100 shows marked improvement in two areas: heightened political understanding and diminished ethnocentrism.

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